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WHAT IS WRONG WITH HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH?

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During the writer's eight years of experience in teaching English to college Freshmen he, like the majority of other instructors in the same subject, has been astounded at the weakness of American high-school graduates in the fundamental mechanics of English. The evil is peculiar to no state or section in our nation. The writer has personally observed that the Freshmen of Texas, Georgia, Indiana, and Wisconsin are all suffering from the same ailment. Practically all of them enter college with the required fifteen or sixteen credit points. Many of them, and especially those in our state colleges, come from the best high schools and private schools in America; yet they are often defective when it comes to the mechanical side of English.

What are the causes of such weakness? Why are our best colleges and universities compelled to give Freshmen courses in English that cover elements that boys and girls should have mastered in their preparatory schools? And, again, why do the majority of our colleges provide sub-Freshman English for those students who are not prepared to go on with the regular Freshman English? The writer is convinced through the class work of his students, through personal conferences with them, through papers written by them on their high-school English courses, and through their other written work that they have not been drilled enough in the theory and practice of writing and then rigidly forced to put into operation their knowledge of fundamental mechanics. They have been given overdoses of English and American literature, courses in short-story writing, oratory, dramatics, and almost anything that could be styled "English" except plain, non-sugar-coated composition. Such themes as they did write were criticized mainly on the basis of thought; common errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation were often passed over without com-

ment—sometimes a general hint as to the errors was written on the cover of the theme.

The following questionnaire was given during the first semester of 1920-21 to seventy-four Freshmen at the University of Wisconsin. But the data collected from the answers (see Table II) come from sixty students, since the answers of twelve students were so general as not to be relied upon for accurate information.

TABLE I
THE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Your name
2. High school you last attended
3. Where? When?
4. Name of any other preparatory school you have attended
5. Give name and address of your last high-school teacher of English
6. How did the time you spent on composition compare with the time you spent on literature? Discuss
7. How many themes did you write during your last year?
8. Which did your teacher stress more, the thought of your composition or the mechanics? Discuss
9. Was it the policy of your high school to demand of the student a fair degree of accuracy in mechanics before credit was given for English courses? Discuss
10. What do you regard as your greatest weakness in Freshman English? Discuss
11. How do you account for this defect? Discuss

The data in Table II are derived from answers to the questions in Table I and from further information obtained in personal conferences with the sixty students. The students considered here are all Freshmen, boys and girls coming from fourteen states and three foreign countries. Most of them are graduates of the public high schools; a few are from private institutions.

Various reflections and speculations may arise from the figures of Table II, but the following conclusions appear obvious:

1. That 100 per cent of the students who received F (fail) were so graded primarily because of weak mechanics (cf. cols. 1, 2, and 3).
2. That students whose mechanics is weak become fully conscious of the fact when they undertake college Freshman English—though it be an eleventh-hour awakening (cf. cols. 1, 2, and 4).

3. That students taught by high-school teachers who stressed mechanics made higher college grades than did those whose teachers stressed the thought of themes (cf. cols. 1, 2, and 6).

TABLE II

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Grade at End of First College Semester	Number of Students Making This Grade	Number Whose Low Grade Was Due to Mechanics	Number Who Regard Mechanics as Their Chief Weakness	Number Whose First Work Was Not Satisfactory Because of Mechanics	Number Whose High School Teachers Stressed Mechanics	Number Whose High Schools Would Not Give Credit in English without a Fair Degree of Accuracy in Mechanics	Average Amount of Class Time Spent on Theory and Practice of Composition during Four Years (in Per Cent)	Average Number of Themes Written during Last High School Year
A.....	3	0	1	0	2	3	50	30
B.....	14	4	6	4	5	10	50.4	21
C.....	21	14	16	8	4	2	35	12.25
D.....	13	12	10	13	2	5	27.3	15
F.....	9	9	8	9	1	2	22.6	15.5
Totals or averages...	60	37	41	34	14	32	37.6	18.75

4. That the students who spent the most time on composition received the best college grades—exception to be noted, however, of the three A students who were unusually intelligent (cf. cols. 1, 2, and 8).

5. That students with a reasonable amount of theme-writing but with only a small amount of theory and class discussion of themes received lower grades than other students with less practice in writing but with more theory and class discussion (cf. cols. 1, 2, 8, and 9).

The following extracts from answers to the questionnaire are typical and speak for themselves:

Case I (final grade, C; comes from one of the best high schools in Wisconsin): "We hardly had any composition at all during the fourth year. We only wrote one theme the whole year, and had about one week of grammar in preparation for the second semester's work." In answer to question 11 he says: "Unfortunately I had

teachers who regarded diagramming, sentence structure, punctuation, etc., as an unnecessary waste of time. The thought was the main thing stressed in the themes; the faulty mechanics might go almost unnoticed. Consequently I graduated from high school with but little knowledge of grammar, spelling, and punctuation."

Case II (final grade, D; spent 90 per cent of his time on literature): "My greatest weakness is punctuation and grammar. . . . I am not trying to heap all the blame on my high-school work, but I do honestly think it is the chief cause of my defect. When I left the grades, I knew grammar pretty well, but forgot it during high school on account of a lack of practice. When I entered the Freshman class this fall, such things as 'co-ordinate conjunctions,' 'dependent clauses,' 'participial phrases,' and so on, seemed like new words to me; and I had no definite idea as to how to punctuate. . . ."

Case III (final grade, D): "English, as studied in my high school, was a subject in which it was easy for me to receive a good grade. I wrote good themes, as to the material used, with very little preparation. The study of literature was very easily bluffed, and the grammar, punctuation, and spelling were taken up so loosely that one could usually rely on the way an expression sounded or looked as to whether it was correct. The natural result is that I have regarded English as an easy subject. My first six weeks here, however, have shown me that it is a course which demands fully as much study as any other course in the university."

Case IV (final grade, F): "As near as I can remember all the composition I had in my high school was during my Freshman year. The other time I spent reading the Bible, and English and American authors."

Now that we have noticed some of the defects in English among high-school graduates and the causes of these defects, we might consider, briefly, some of the *causes* of these *causes*; that is, why do the secondary schools do such unsatisfactory teaching of English so far as mechanics is concerned? Numerous and varied investigations and talks with heads of English departments of high schools and with principals of high schools have led the writer to the following conclusions:

1. On account of war conditions during the past three years there resulted such a scarcity of good teachers that many incompetent substitutes were employed. This condition is only a temporary one and not to be regarded seriously in the sum total effect.

2. Parental and community demands have much to do with the present situation. The student who can read a book and discuss it glibly, the student who can deliver an oratorical performance, the student who collects from books and his instructors enough material to write a long and learned dissertation upon *Hamlet*—all these make a greater impression upon the average parent and citizen of the community than does that boy or girl who prefers to gain accuracy in grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.

3. Then there is the overwhelmingly strong demand on the part of parents—who are present in the community—that their children be “passed” in English, regardless of whether they know the subject.

4. The teaching of literature is both easier and more pleasant for the teacher than is composition. The average student, too, prefers reading to writing, for much the same reasons. Unanimity rules; *ergo*, composition is slighted.

5. Too many teachers regard grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other similar elements as unimportant. They choose to have the young thinkers write long papers that express thought (ideas which in most cases are culled from books and other sources). They forget that the mechanics is a basis for accurate and clear expression and not the end of writing itself; that these essentials must be as well known as the alphabet or the multiplication table before any progress can be attained. It is the mechanical side of composition that gradually drops out of the life of the pupil if he does not make constant and conscious use of it. But as he grows older and has more experience, ideas or thoughts of real value come to him. Then he has something to write—if he but have the tools with which to shape his thought clearly so that other men may know it as he knows it.

6. But perhaps the greatest reason for this one-sided English teaching is that teachers have more work than they can possibly

do. It is gratifying to know that the great majority of teachers are well aware of the fact that they are not doing the kind of teaching they realize is best for the pupils. It is impossible for a teacher of composition to handle effectively from one hundred to two hundred pupils; yet there are such attempts! One product of this system of wholesale teaching facetiously but truthfully wrote, "I was occasionally exposed to punctuation—but it did not take." Teachers, after all, are human; they have the mundane trait of being limited in their power of doing things. Unfortunately they are not able to add an extra hour to the twenty-four of the day. It would no doubt be a blessing to humanity at large—the teacher excluded—if the time-pressed pedagogue possessed some kind of a *tempo-magnifier* that could swell the day for him some six or eight hours, within which he might labor even longer than he does at present.

High-school English can undoubtedly be improved far beyond its present status if teachers, parents, and governing boards will observe these outstanding points:

1. Only capable men and women should teach—those who know the subject and how to teach it and are, moreover, honestly working for the ultimate good of the pupils.
2. More composition (both in theory and practice) should be given throughout the four years of high school. Neither grammar nor composition should be slighted during the fourth year.
3. Pupils should be impressed with the importance of the mechanical phase of composition.
4. Parents and teachers should encourage pupils to work for knowledge and not for marks.
5. Teachers should have in their charge fewer pupils, and thus have more time to devote to these.